

# Survival Alphabet Soup

by Sue McGown,

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There is little doubt that our library image needs improving. I recently overheard one parent telling another visitor to our library, "This is the first library where I have ever felt comfortable. I've always felt threatened by libraries."

The atmosphere we establish in the school library is extremely important. Our attitude is probably the most important factor in determining atmosphere.

The 19-century philosopher and psychologist

William James wrote, "One of the greatest discoveries of my generation was that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind." I believe we can change unfavorable images and publicize our unique position in education by choosing to focus on the positive in every situation.

School libraries are in transition. That's good news and bad news for us. Change can be frightening, but it is also an opportunity for growth. Because change is coming about so fast and furious, we must communicate to our communities what it is that we do and why we do it better than nonprofessionals.

We provide the link to connect students with the information resources they need. We acquire and evaluate information resources in all formats. We can communicate these services by offering them and publicizing them to teachers, building and central office administrators, parents, students, and our larger community. Continuous communication with the decision makers is essential to achieving our goals.

Mission statements help to determine what we want to accomplish and goal setting can clarify how we can accomplish it. Our school and library mission statements appear with this article. Each activity we plan supports our mission statement and goals. Decisions about how we spend our time are easier when we are focused on our goals.

Administrators want library programs they can be proud of. After you have defined your goals for the library program, discuss them with administrators. The trust and respect we desire must be earned; consistency is an important key to trust. Meet with the administrators often to continue to share your vision for the library. Notes, memos, annual and monthly reports are also important in keeping the administration informed.

Our responsibility to serve and develop a welcoming atmosphere that is conducive to learning must always supersede our need to maintain materials and keep records. We must struggle against that "warehouse syndrome" where we try to achieve perfect order and meticulous records, but no one cares. Unless we are serving our population and the materials are in constant use, we are of little value to anyone. I know how disconcerting it is to see the shelves after busy days, but they will be back in order eventually (if only at the end of inventory).

Involve parent volunteers in the library program. They will be the biggest supporters in your school community. Plan activities (coffee, tea, exhibits) that will bring visitors to the library so they can see what happens there.



Here is an "alphabet soup" of ideas we use to keep focused on our goals and also publicize our accomplishments.



**Atmosphere.** Our library supports the mission statement by maintaining an atmosphere that is conducive to developing lifelong readers and learners. The library functions as an extension of all the classrooms to enhance the education of our students.

**Books and Bulletin Boards.** With other school librarians we provide a summer reading list for each grade level. We work with teachers to plan specific types of reading activities. Each month, a different grade level is responsible for the two large bulletin boards in the library. We work out a schedule in August.

**Communication, Cooperation and Collaboration.** We meet with grade-level teachers to plan ways to support their curriculum in the library. This develops a valuable partnership with them.

**Displays.** Our teachers generously share their personal collections in the library display cases. Student projects are also displayed throughout the year.

**Evaluate.** Utilize teacher or student surveys to ask your customers what they like and what improvements they would suggest that will improve the school library.

**Friends of the Library.** At the Book Fair, Friends of the Library set up a table of books from which parents and teachers can choose a book to donate to the library. We provide bookplates naming the donor or honoree. (Many parents choose to honor their children's teachers. Some parents and grandparents honor their children and vice versa.) From this event, we receive about 300 book donations.



**Grandparents Day.** On this schoolwide observance, we display student art on the library bulletin boards. This encourages students to bring their grandparents to the library.

**Help Teachers.** As the resource specialist, you have valuable expertise to offer the teachers. Say "yes" whenever you can.

**Inform.** Notes, memos or e-mail can be used to tell colleagues about coming library events, lists of new books and materials.

**Jump** at every chance to serve and keep a joyful attitude.

**Keep Focused.**

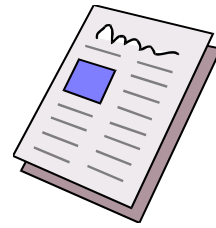
**Lunch Bunch.** For over 10 years, we have sponsored a storytime during two lunch periods each week. By grade level, students bring a sack lunch to the library.

**Model behaviors** you want to see in students and colleagues. We librarians especially want to model reading.

**National Library Week** is a good time to put a bookmark in the teachers' mail boxes.

**One-minute book commercials.** We ask students to write one-minute booktalks to "sell" a book to their classmates. The students have to time their presentations. These books circulate.

**Publish.** Write a monthly column for your school newsletter or publish a web page focused on the school library.



**Quick Reads.** Here's a reading motivation idea that works for us. Before students arrive, place a book at each student's chair. For seven minutes the students read the book silently. At a signal, they pass their book to the left and begin reading the book passed to them. Fourth and fifth graders can read a significant amount in seven minutes. In one session, they can be introduced to at least four new books.

**Request suggestions** from all staff and students when it is time to order books, magazines or software.

**Serve with a Smile.** Share articles you read that apply to some area of the curriculum or interest of teachers.

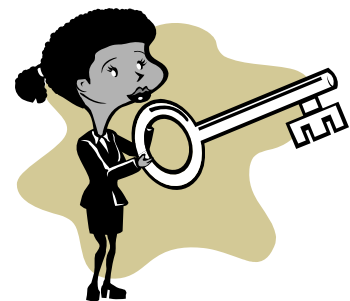
**Thank teachers** for their help in getting student overdues back to the library. Tips for effective use of equipment will be appreciated by teachers.

**Use every minute constructively.** Break those big jobs up into small chunks that can be done quickly. That feeling of accomplishment will encourage you to do the next chunk tomorrow. For example, if you have 50 books to catalog, do them in groups of five until you are finished. Life by the inch is a cinch.

**Vision for the future** involves collection building as well as technology advances.

**Work smarter, not harder.** To avoid handling mail and advertisements more than once, make a decision to file, discard or order the advertised item at the time you open the mail. Making "piles" to decide about later is not good time management because it requires handling the same material twice.

**Express** your expectations with students, teachers, and administration. We often expect others to "read our minds" and know what we need or want. That is unrealistic and we must express what we expect if we want it to happen.



**You are the key** to your success. Avoid "victim" thinking and take control of your life.

**Zero in on your goals!**

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